

A Mission to Cuba: Tale of the Doomed Raiders

By PAUL MESKIL

Fifth of a series

On March 17, 1960, President Eisenhower authorized the CIA to form a guerrilla army of Cuban refugees and invade Cuba. Shortly thereafter, the CIA dispatched agent Frank Sturgis to Guatemala to confer with President Miguel Ydigoras about setting up training bases in that country.

The "secret" mission was quickly exposed and reported by the Guatemalan news media.

"I had planned to sneak into the Cuban Embassy while I was in Guatemala City," Sturgis told this reporter recently, "but the president suggested I leave the country because of the publicity. The newspapers and TV reported I was a CIA agent and was trying to obtain bases for the Cuban invasion."

Over the next year, the CIA trained Cuban recruits in Guatemala, Panama, Costa Rica and the United States. Sturgis, a marine combat veteran of World War II, trained about 50 Cubans in the Florida Everglades.

Sturgis was part of the agency's top-secret Operation 40, an infiltration and intelligence-gathering group

that was to go into Cuba before the Bay of Pigs assault.

Some former CIA agents describe Operation 40 as an "assassination squad," Sturgis won't go that far.

"It was a top CIA project," he says. "Most of the men in it were Cubans who had been trained by the U.S. Army. I am not saying that Operation 40 had an assassination squad. There are reports that there was one, but I'm not saying so."

To infiltrate

"The prime purpose was infiltration, not assassination. They (group members) were to infiltrate Cuba and contact anti-Castro military leaders, political leaders and underground people. And they could kill—if they had to, if it was really necessary."

Chief of Operation 40 was Jose Joaquin Salmeron, a former Castro aide who defected and became a CIA agent. Two of his cousins also worked for the agency.

Early in 1961, the CIA learned that a group of Cuban military officers was plotting to overthrow Castro. "The leader of this plot was Major Humberto Sori Marin, a former Havana lawyer who drafted the Castro penal code which made firing squad executions legal. Sori Marin had been assistant general of Castro's army, presiding judge at the 1959 "war crimes" trials

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that sent hundreds of Batista loyalists to the firing squads, and Castro's first minister of agriculture. But by 1961 he had turned against the Castro regime.

His partners in the anti-Castro conspiracy included other Cuban army, navy and air force commanders, the chief of Castro's secret police, the deputy finance minister and the head of the Cuban Sugar Institute. They planned a military uprising during which Castro and his Communist advisers would be killed.

As soon as the CIA learned what they were up to, Operation 40 went into action. Agents slipped into Cuba, contacted the conspirators and asked them to time the military revolt to coincide with the Bay of Pigs invasion.

A month before the coordinated revolt-invasion was to start, a militia patrol was sent to the Miramar section of Havana to arrest a woman who had been overheard complaining about food shortages. As the militia jeep pulled up to her house, she ran out the door and

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Nelson: a veteran conspirator.

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fled to the nearby home of a retired engineer and his wife.

The militiamen charged after her, entered the engineer's house and burst into a room where ten leaders of the military conspiracy were seated around a table littered with Havana street maps pinpointing the locations of key installations that were to be seized.

The militiamen were outnumbered and outnumbered. They hesitated, not sure what to do. Then informed sources said, Sorri Marin pulled his pistol. A short burst from a Czech-made submachine gun wounded him in the leg and persuaded him and his co-conspirators to surrender. They were hauled off to La Cabana Fortress for questioning.

Around this time, in March 1961, a noisy party was held in a small white bungalow in Miami's Cuban section. The bungalow was a CIA "safe house," and the party was a spoof celebration for an Operation 40 squad—five Cubans and an American—that was about to invade Cuba.

Contact underground

The squad's mission was to contact the anti-Castro underground and create a diversion on the north coast to make Castro think a guerrilla force was landing there. The diversionary action was to begin shortly before the real invasion on the south coast.

Most of the people at the Miami party were Cuban refugees. Among the Americans there were Frank Nelson, a former Havana businessman, and a veteran Caribbean conspirator, and CIA contractors Frank Sturgis and Alex Rorke.

Nelson fell into conversation with young Angus McNair, lone American member of the Cuba-bound squad. Asked why he was going on such a dangerous mission, McNair replied: "Because Castro killed an American soldier, Bill Morgan."

(Morgan, a former U.S. Army paratrooper who attained the rank of major in Castro's army, was executed by a Castro firing squad on March 11, 1961.)

"About 20 people were at the party," Nelson recalled recently. "I asked McNair, 'Aren't you afraid of a leak, with all these people knowing about your mission?' He said they were all friends and relatives of the Cubans who were going with him. He trusted them all. That was a fatal mistake."

The CIA raiders set off the following night from the Florida Keys in the 42-foot motor launch Mercury, loaded with automatic rifles, tommyguns, pistols, grenades and boxes of ammo. Their destination was an inlet of Cabañas Bay in Pinar del Rio Province, about 30 miles from Havana.

Reputed CIA agent

McNair, 25, of Coral Gables, Fla., was working for Sturgis. His orders were to contact Howard Anderson, 41, a reputed CIA agent who owned a chain of gas stations in Havana and commanded the American Legion post there.

Anderson had been in close touch with the Cuban military officers who were plotting an anti-Castro coup. After they were captured, he was instructed to determine if other Cuban officers were in on the plot and if they would attempt to carry it out. He was also to advise the CIA of the progress of the diversionary action to be launched by Operation 40 in Pinar del Rio.

Shortly after midnight on March 19, the Mercury scaped the sandy bottom of the inlet and drifted away. McNair sat perfectly still, his hand on the trigger of his rifle, his eyes fixed on the dark water.



In one CIA plot to kill Castro, the rifle failed to fire.

Super-secret Operation 40 was stymied so many times by the alert Cubans that it began to sound like Catch 22

Hearing none, they jumped into the waist-deep water and started to unload the boat.

Searchlights were turned on, blinding the invaders. Armed men spilled onto the beach and surrounded them. More than 100 soldiers and militiamen had been waiting for them to land. Someone, perhaps a Castro agent who was a guest at their going-away party, had talked.

Anderson was arrested the same night on his way to rendezvous with McNair. The two Americans died at dawn before a firing squad on April 19, two days after the Bay of Pigs invasion began.

Seven Cubans were executed with them, including Gilberto Betancourt, one of the leaders of a spearhead force sent from Cuba to invade Panama in 1953. A former Castro aide, he defected after

the Panama fiasco and went to work for the CIA.

Twelve more anti-Castro plotters were executed next day, April 20. Seven of them were shot in the bullet-pocked meat of LaCabana Fortress. Among them were Humberto Sorri Marin, the man who legalized firing squads, and a mysterious American citizen who called himself Rafael Diaz Bencom and was employed by CIA. He reportedly served as liaison between Sorri Marin's group and the agency.

Although the Bay of Pigs adventure was a disaster, the CIA plots continued to work for the agency. Some of them were assigned to the "spook ship" Rex, a 17-foot converted U.S. Navy patrol boat that made hundreds of clandestine voyages to Cuba.

Flying the Nicaraguan flag, the Rex

operated out of West Palm Beach and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. It carried the latest radar and sonar equipment, five cannons, several .30-caliber machine-guns and two 20-foot speedboats.

Its skipper reportedly was Eugenio Rolando Martinez, a Miami real estate salesman and CIA agent who made more than 300 nocturnal runs to Cuba. (He was taken off the official CIA payroll in 1972, the day after he was caught in the Watergate break-in.)

On the night of July 21, 1963, one of the Rex speedboats deposited six men on a small island off Las Villas province. The invaders reportedly had been sent to kill Castro at a July 26 rally in Havana's Plaza de la Revolution, but they never got there. They were picked up by a military patrol soon after they landed.

Men captured

On the night of Oct. 21, 1963, the Rex sent its twin speedboats ashore at the western tip of Cuba. The landing was observed by a militia patrol and the six men in the first boat were captured as soon as they hit the beach. The second launch was sunk by a Cuban gunboat as it raced back to the Rex.

Cannon fire from the Rex drove off the Cuban vessel. The men in the water were hauled aboard the spy ship. Next morning, a U.S. Navy submarine surfaced near the Rex off the Bahamas. Five Cubans—four dead, one wounded—reportedly were transferred to the sub, which then submerged and headed for Florida.

One month after this incident, President Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald, who had visited the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City shortly before the murder and had joined the pro-Castro Fair Play for Cuba Committee. President Johnson later told an aide, Leo Janos, that he thought the Kennedy assassination might have been a "retaliation" for the CIA-backed efforts to kill Castro.

These efforts continued after Kennedy's death.

Leader of students

In the fall of 1964, CIA agents in Paris made contact with Cuban Army Major Rolando Cubela, a hero of the Castro revolution and a leader of the Cuban student organization. Two Cuban-born CIA employees, Luis Enrique Trencos and Carlos Trepanio spoke with Cubela and put him in touch with CIA agents working out of the American Embassy in Paris. The discussions continued a few days later in Madrid, where Cubela had become disenchanted with the Castro regime and he eventually agreed to kill his former idol. On his return to Havana, he was given a high-powered sight.

Other plotters rented an apartment overlooking the building where the prime minister's office was located. Cubela reportedly drew a bead on Castro one day in 1965. He fired up the cross hairs and squeezed the trigger, but the rifle failed to fire. Castro's secret police later got wind of the assassination attempt and arrested Cubela and seven other plotters, all of whom were saved from the firing squad by a clemency appeal from Castro.

This may have been the last CIA-sponsored attempt to assassinate Castro. But other CIA activities kept the Caribbean caudillo boiling.

Next: The plot to free the U.S.S. Pueblo